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DC Turns to Vigilantism Again

Vigilantism in the DC Universe goes back well over a century, to the days of the Old West, when a masked Vigilante rode the trails, taking justice into his own hands. In more recent years a very different Vigilante crossed paths with the Teen Titans before administering justice in the pages of his own series, which came to an end in 1988. But it appears that the spirit of Vigilantism is alive and well in the DCU, and it's about to manifest itself in the person of a new Vigilante.

This ***Vigilante*** has been a long time coming: the series was initially announced as part of DC's "Superstorm" initiative on August of 2003, Vigilante was one of the three Wildstorm-produced titles associated with Superman that were due to launch around the time of *Brian Azzarello & Jim Lee's* ***Superman*** run. Originally, the series was to have been produced by *Micah Wright & Carlos D'Anda*, but their take on the character never saw print. Now, two years later, the Vigilante is ready to punish the unjust once again—but this time, he's doing so at the behest of new creators *Bruce Jones & Ben Oliver.*

"*Alex Sinclair* contacted me about doing the book shortly after I signed with DC," Jones said. "They we're looking to revamp the character and liked my take on him--which is very dark—I know, big surprise. From the point of view of a superhero book, I think this may be the darkest think I've ever done or maybe anyone's ever done. We pulled no punches."

Astute readers may have recognized editor *Alex Sinclair* as a part of DC's WildStorm team. While ***Vigilante*** is set in the DC Universe and is published under the DC imprint, the series is produced through the WildStorm offices (much like *Rick Veitch & Tommy Lee Edwards'* ***The Question*** and *Brian Azzarello & Lee Bermejo's* ***Lex Luthor: The Man of Steel***), which gives Jones a little bit more freedom in his pursuit of gritty storylines..

"We all knew this was going to be a pretty grim piece when I began, so Wildstorm seemed the most logical home for it," Jones said. "But things are changing rapidly up at DC in general these days thanks to *Dan [DiDio]*, and what was once considered verboten is increasingly more accepted today. Dan's doing a great job of letting the books grow up while retaining the flavor that made them popular in the first place. Without change, we stagnate...

"The thing about it that's most appealing to me, is the climate of freedom Wildstorm gave me to really get in there and plumb the depths of the characters psyche—I mean *really* go down deep and discover what makes him tick and why. This will be used as a slow reveal throughout the series. It's also a pretty sexy book, but not—I hope—without good reason. As for surprises: well, if anyone out there actually figures out the big surprise reveal, they should be working in comics. The clues are all there--it's sorting them out that's half the fun."

Jones' new ***Vigilante*** doesn't supplant the Western version or the ***Teen Titans*** spinoff series; instead, it introduces a new character who's laying claim to the name, just as there has been more than one Manhunter or Sandman. "The original Vigilante began as a western character way back in the day," Jones said. "His most recent incarnation was a kind of DC version of Marvel's Punisher, but my take will be something else entirely. Ours is a limited series—though open-ended, of course—and I had some very specific ideas on what I wanted to say about Vigilante in terms of who he is now and exactly why he came to be that particular person. There's a lot of back story here, in some ways a Year One version I suppose—but told from a contemporary viewpoint.

"In other words, he's a brand new character for all intents and purposes. One does not need to have read the other versions of Vigilante to get an immediate handle on ours. This is primarily a character study wrapped in an action-oriented venue. He's a *very* troubled man—a not altogether pleasant fellow—and my task was to explain why that is, and those things one might still find redeeming in him."

What led Jones to create a new Vigilante rather than reinterpreting the most recent version? "It was an opportunity to get deeply—very deeply—into the psyche of a protagonist, and while it's always possible to just tag on something with any existing DC or Marvel character, I felt the continuity-free format allowed for more room to explore the internal workings of this guy's mind," Jones said. "What happened during his formative years, for instance, is extremely important to the heart of the story, and I had a certain kind of approach in mind. We're talking about a shattered mind here, who—in some ways—has managed to piece itself back together; first merely to exist, then to do something in return for what's been done to him."

Jones isn't trying to empathize with or glamorize the man behind the mask, describing him as "a very disturbed and very disturbing mind. This guy is hardly a hero, certainly not in the traditional sense. I wouldn't call him sadistic exactly…just *exacting*. He knows what he has to do and how to go about it; just not—in the beginning anyway—why he's compelled to do it. That's a learning process he shares with the reader. It's pretty painful, maybe on both counts, but necessary, I felt."

Jones has described the book as being "very, very, very dark," but he explains that "dark does not necessarily imply grotesque or bloody, or even sensational. But the verisimilitude is certainly brooding. All superheroes exact some kind of vengeance/punishment, some more violent than others.

"I think it might be the general tone of our book that may make it appear, at first blush, as overly dark and graphic. I knew this character was going to be meting out retaliation in what would almost certainly appear a somewhat psychotic way, and I wanted the underpinnings for those actions to be clear, both in content and to the reader by the arrival of the denouement. That's really what I find interesting in writing—the cause as opposed to just the kinetic effect."

Vigilante is the first of several projects that Jones has in the works at DC—projects that also include ***Warlord*** and a new take on ***Deadman***. For the writer, this return to DC is almost a homecoming, since his involvement with the company goes back the better part of three decades. However, he is most impressed with the creative freedom he's been given since he returned to DC. "I think it's important to realize that there's a great deal more room to maneuver and roam within the so-called DCU than some fans might suppose. One can navigate within the realm of existing arcs and story threads without feeling hampered or hobbled by them. I like to think of it as a situation where, if wanted or needed, you can introduce virtually any Time- Warner owned character for what purposes you may see fit, so long as you're aware and respectful of what's gone before and have at least a working knowledge of what your fellow writers are up to."

Don't misinterpret that to mean that Jones plans to link ***Vigilante*** with the looming ***Infinite Crisis***. "Our story *could* certainly dovetail with most of what's happened now, even though it might not seem immediately related to it. It's a contemporary piece, though, and if I or someone else picks up after issue six, other DCU characters could certainly be employed with no problem in this Vigilante's time-frame."

And as far as that aforementioned sixth issue is concerned, Jones again warns readers that the status quo as the series begins definitely won't be the status quo as the series ends. "By the end of the last issue, changes take place that will significantly alter an ongoing series, should DC elect to do one."

Vigilante #1, a $2.99 comic, is scheduled for September 28th release.

by Matt Brady (with Cliff Biggers)

Courtesy your friendly neighborhood comics outlet!

scanner & his

DCP BUG

a bug scan for Digital Comics Preservation

Comic Shop Newsarama

Produced by Comic Shop News in cooperation with Matt Brady and newsarama.com

Middleton's Thunder-ous DC Debut

When DC revealed that they had signed acclaimed artist *Josh Middleton* to an exclusive contract, speculation ran strong regarding his premiere project for the publisher. What would best show off Middleton's versatility at human interest sequences and dramatic action?

Howsabout the first meeting of the two mightiest heroes in the DC Universe?

Shazam/Superman: First Thunder, a limited series written by *Judd Winick*, offers readers a glimpse into the hitherto-unrevealed adventure that brought these heroes together. And for Middleton, it was the perfect project.

"In my first meeting with the ever-energetic Dan DiDio at the DC offices we discussed the type of project I was aiming to work on,"Middleton told ***Comic Shop Newsarama's*** *Matt Brady,"* and my number one request was that it be something more fantastic than what I had been doing, something more magical. I really wanted a chance to draw something bigger than life."

DiDio had the perfect project in mind. "Dan really seemed to understand what I was grasping for creatively and I think the mention of 'magical' was key in bringing Shazam to the table," Middleton said. "Dan mentioned that it was also one of his goals to bring some magic back to the DC universe as a lot of that aspect had been stripped away over recent years, and Shazam really seemed to embody all of that.

"Nothing was decided at that first meeting, but of the things we talked about, Shazam struck me as having real potential. All of the characters and stories Dan mentioned were exciting in their own way, but I was certain of the feel I was after; I needed to draw something magical, but still an ass-kicking, bigger-than-life adventure, and perhaps most importantly, it had to remain intimate and character driven. It wasn't long before I got a call from *Judd Winick* to talk about this story he'd been wanting to tell for a very long time, and as it happens it was very magically kick-ass indeed."

Many artists talk about "dream projects," but Middleton is the exception: since he's not a longtime superhero fan with intimate knowledge of the various heroes and their histories, he had no superheroic itches waiting to be scratched. "My idea of a superhero is based more in nostalgia—but strangely enough nostalgia for an era in which I hadn't been born, if such a thing is possible," Middleton said. "Some of it is in the design of it all, the golden age of illustration the world was enjoying in the '30s and '40s, but it does seem that the comic book superhero somehow made more sense, that the design and sensibilities seemed more appropriate in a way.

"Perhaps it is partly the result of the world we live in or perhaps just the constant 'deconstruction' of the superhero by tired old men, but I find the nostalgic charm of many classic heroes becoming increasingly valid today, and Captain Marvel is a fine example of a classic hero with broad, almost timeless appeal if treated respectfully and done right. Needless to say, the same holds true for many of DC's heroes, something I have gained a new respect for."

As Middleton became more familiar with Captain Marvel, he had to make artistic decisions regarding the hero's look. Should Billy Batson and Captain Marvel look like a father and his son? A child and the adult version of himself? "I can see a challenge in drawing an imposing figure with childlike qualities and not having them come off as a big dolt, but it hasn't been as difficult as I imagined it could have been," Middleton explained. "I have been aided immensely by the characterization contained within the story. *Mike Carlin,* my esteemed editor on this project, was kind enough to send me a stack of reference early on for a solid foundation on which to build my interpretation of Captain Marvel and his world, and I am happy to say that Judd's writing has really captured the wondrous spirit a story like Captain Marvel's really should have. Believing in the character has made him so much easier to draw. Now, what it is in the drawing that brings the youthful innocence to Captain Marvel and the heroic responsibility to little Billy is hard to say exactly, but I think beyond the obvious similarities in facial features it is in their body language and poise, and the knowledge behind every line as I draw it that they are in fact the same person."

Of course, Captain Marvel isn't the sole superhero in the story. Superman's role int he story presented another challenge: how to make two mighty heroes look powerful and distinctive at the same time. "This really comes down to body language, and they really do hold themselves differently, at least I hope I can succeed in expressing that... Superman's lines just tend to arrange themselves a bit more authoritatively—maybe even a little regal. I don't want him to come off as arrogant, but his otherworldly, slightly above-it-all nature is just a byproduct of the fact that he simply is Superman, which would naturally put the shoulders back and the chest out a little.

"On the other hand, Captain Marvel is really a boy inside this immensely powerful being, and his posture should reflect that. He is not always aware of himself as a god-like man—and when he is, he would tend to ham it up a little more, to lay on the hero thing a little thick, whereas Superman just carries it always. I really enjoy the subtle contrast when the two are played against one another."

As is his preference, Middleton handles all the art duties on ***First Thunder***—pencils, inks, and colors. "I just can't see it any other way. I don't see images in my imagination and think, 'I'd like to complete 33% of that and hand it off to two people I don't really know for completion.' I think the separation we have of the processes involved in creating a comic is the result of the technology and economics of yesteryear. It has bred some intensely talented specialists, but I don't count myself amongst that group. The production line is American comic book history and it certainly has its place, and has obviously created some legendary collaborations and wonderful work, but too often that wonderful work is despite the process.

"Everyone tends to acknowledge the great teams of the past, the moments when all of the art seemed to click, but I would reckon that for every one of those moments there are at least ten where the penciler is trying to muster the will to live upon viewing their butchered work, back from the colorist all whored-up in neon hues and 'rendered' features. I'd rather avoid all of that by taking on the burden of full color art and collaborating only when I feel there is something that needs done that I am incapable of doing. I don't know that this approach results in anything more than art that I can truly call my own."

Shazam/Superman: First Thunder #1, a $3.50 comic, should be in comic shops at the same time as this issue of ***CSN.*** Future issues of the four-part limited series should follow on a monthly schedule.

Spider-Woman in the Spotlight? Cho 'Nuff!

Frank Cho, who recently wrapped up his fan-fave ***Shanna the She-Devil*** series, has a penchant for illustrating attractive, confident, powerful women. So it's probably no surprise that his next story arc spotlights an attractive, confident, powerful woman...

Cho has signed on to illustrate a two-part Spider-Woman story arc slated to appear in ***New Avengers #s 14 & 15***; the two-parter, written by *Brian Bendis,* will set the stage for December's ***Spider-Woman: Origin*** series co-written by Bendis & *Brian Reed* with art by *Jonathan & Joshua Luna*—which will in turn lead into a new ongoing ***Spider-Woman*** seires written by Bendis and illustrated by his ***Daredevil*** partner *Alex Maleev.*

Cho's involvement with ***New Avengers*** began in a most roundabout way: it all grew out of a Spider-Woman pinup that Cho did for ***Wizard.*** "Brian saw my Spider-Woman pin-up [and] he called me up and asked if I was interested in drawing the 'Spider-Woman' story arc for ***New Avengers***. And here I am. I'm drawing issues #14 and #15 of ***New Avengers,*** written by *Brian Bendis,*" Cho told ***Comic Shop Newsarama's*** *Benjamin Ong Pang Kean.*The story will feature Spider-Woman's retelling of her own early days, paving the way for the next story arc.

It's probably no surprise to *Frank Cho* fans that his artistic vision of Spider-Woman is much the same as his approach to Shanna. "Make her hot and sexy. Let's just say that my Spider-Woman will *not* look like an anorexic waif. She's going to be very full figured woman with hips.

"She has a great costume. Very bold and striking. Spider-Woman is a survivor. She doesn't solely depend on her powers. She uses her wits and S.H.I.E.L.D. training to get the job done."

New Avengers #s 14 & 15 are slated for late fall release.

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Once More, with Feeling

Big things are happening in the DC Universe.

Hal Jordan is back as Green Lantern. Barry Allen plays a major role in the recently-completed ***Flash*** story arc. The friendship of DC's most powerful trio of heroes has run into seemingly insurmountable problems.

And Barbara Gordon... well...

(**SPOILER ALERT:** If you haven't read ***Birds of Prey #85*** and haven't heard the buzz regarding this book, you might want to skip ahead to the next story.)

Barbara Gordon has wiggled her toes.

In case you missed recent ***Birds of Prey*** developments, this issue saw Barbara (Oracle, formerly Batgirl) Gordon go under the knife to remove a tumor still present in her system, the result of a fight with Brainiac circa issue #72. While the growth had seemed benign at first, for the past few months, the apparently sentient tumor had been growing, causing Barbara's health to steadily deteriorate. And while the surgery ran into some twists, the final page of the book shocked readers with the revelation that Barbara Gordon, paralyzed ever since she was shot by the Joker in ***Batman: The Killing Joke,*** had wiggled her toes. And that raises some very important questions.

Will Barbara regain full use of her legs? Is this a cruel joke? Are her toes, in fact, now cybernetic refuges of the Brainiac virus? Will she put the cape and cowl back on?

Writer *Gail Simone* spoke with ***Comic Shop Newsarama's*** *Matt Brady* about this surprising plot twist and what it might mean for the future.

Simone had dropped a few hints that the Brainiac virus might be "more symbiotic than parasitic. It allowed Babs to develop the physical version of the Oracle mask, which she used to actually communicate with technology on a level beyond normal human means. It also made improvements to her physical form, like improving her eyeglasses prescription—and, as seen at the end of #85, allowing her for the first time to move her toes."

Brainiac doesn't have a reputation as a benevolent being—so why help Barbara Gordon? " Brainiac is, to me, anti-organic, anti-nature. He's sort of poison for living things. And he used Barbara in an attempt to rebuild a physical form for himself. We think this is a big story, and the questions obviously are: how much control does she have? Is it permanent? Will it lead to greater movement?..."

What Brainiac hadn't planned on was Barbara Gordon's will power and skilled intellect. "Unlike traditional illnesses, this is one that Babs could fight back against, mentally. And she simply hacked the virus. She infected it with her personality... Barbara threatened to destroy herself to ensure that the virus didn't spread. Faced with that threat, which she fully intended to go through with if necessary, she was able to convince the virus to switch off, and she could keep at least its memory alive in her photographic recall."

The most significant toe-wiggle in contemporary comics history wasn't an accident: Simone confirmed that this had been in the works ever since the Brainiac virus was first introduced last year. "We plan *way* ahead on ***Birds of Prey.*** And this is just the start of a really amazing story, I think!... I don't want to give too much away, but I think it's very powerful stuff..."

Fans have clamored for Gordon's return to mobility for quite a while, but Simone wasn't comfortable with the most often-suggested remedies. "I commonly hear, 'Oh, why not just get Zatanna or Green Lantern to fix her? It'd only take a second.' Which makes no sense to me at all. Zatanna and Green Lantern aren't surgeons. They could make it much, *much* worse for her. This is a spinal injury, for God's sake! And we've seen how well it works when Zatanna tries to do mental surgery.

"I don't think they'd be in any hurry to use their weapons and spells on someone's spine. I know stories have been done in the past where such things have happened, but it makes no sense. If either of those characters can make paralyzed people walk again, why aren't they spending every day of their lives healing entire hospital wards of people? It's never added up for me..."

Hypothetically speaking, if Babs got function in her legs back tomorrow, would she still be Oracle? Would she return to being Batgirl? "She's Batgirl now," Simone said. "Will she put on a costume again? Really, I'd rather people just read the story. I don't want this to be a story where someone whose dead is suddenly cured by Neron or whatever. Wait and see... But, in the larger sense, I will say, I can't see Barbara giving up being Oracle. She does the most good that way, and that's what she cares about....

"This is really a story we've been working towards for a long time. It's not part of ***Crisis*** in particular, just a story about Barbara Gordon, told as respectfully as possible. I hope people give this upcoming arc a shot...I think they're going to really enjoy it."

Simone is following up this pivotal issue with a standalone story in ***Birds of Prey #86*** that she describes as "a fun breather with three stories, with art by three fantastic artists; *Adriana Melo, David Lopez,* and *Bruce Timm.* It's essential reading, not a filler. And then in the next issue, we start our final arc before the 'One Year Later…' event, and it's a thriller: Huntress vs. the Mob, Black Canary in Star City, a big confrontation with a certain caped crusader, and of course, the continuing story of what happens to Babs. And we continue to get *Joe Bennett's* wonderful, expressive art."

Birds of Prey #86 is scheduled for September 21st release, with #87 following on October 19th.

Ins & Outs

In: Mary Jane Watson, who's graduating to her own ongoing series later this year when Marvel launches ***Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane.*** "I'll tell ya, every time I sit down to write an MJ script it's a real delight, so for Marvel to commit to an ongoing series is just about the coolest thing," Eisner-award-winning writer *Sean McKeever* said. "So now I'm back, and I get to work with *Takeshi (Miyazawa)* and *Christina (Strain)* again!..." McKeever explained that "the folks at Marvel don't really have to publish comics about teenage drama, you know?. They're doing pretty well for themselves with all the stuff that focuses on super heroics. So it means a lot to me that they're committed to Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane as an ongoing series, let alone putting it out there at all."

McKeever said that what readers will see in the first issue "is the direction I'd always intended to take after the ***Homecoming*** storyline—but since it's a new chapter in MJ's so-called life, it'll be easy to dive into. I'd say more about what I have planned, but—well, I don't want to spoil it for anyone who's waiting for the ***MJ Homecoming*** digest! That would just be mean." Look for ***Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane #1*** in December.

Out: ***Adventure sof Superman #643,*** the epilogue to the startling "Sacrifice" storyline, sold out of its overprinting prior to release. DC is considering a second printing, but no decision had been made at presstime.

Out: ***OzF5: Gale Force,*** the Oz-themed oneshot, sold out upon release. Alias Comics president *Mike S. Miller* credited the perpetual appeal of *L. Frank Baum's* fantasy world as an important element in the sellout success. Miller describes ***Gale Force*** as " basically ***X-Men*** meets ***The Wizard of Oz,*** and it captures everything that's fun about the fantasy and imagination that made the original story so popular in the first place." A second printing should be in comic shops in the near future.

In: ***Smoke,*** the three-issue limited series by *Alex De Campi & Igor Kordey,* will be collected in trade paperback this fall. Praised by critics, ***Smoke*** is set in a futuristic London run by a government both morally and financially bankrupt. The series' star, an ex-soldier-turned-government-assassin, must contend with a crisis in London, an unusual terrorist group and their even more unusual demands, and a vindictive ex-girlfriend as he tries to rebuild his own shattered life. IDW plans a November release for the standard trade paperabck as well as a signed numbered limited edition hardcover.

Out: Writer *Steve Niles* has confirmed that his Cal McDonald series ***Supernatural Freak Machine*** is out of the picture at IDW, the company that released the first issues of the series. "Other projects with IDW are moving forward," Niles wrote at his forum. "It just didn't work out with Cal. That's the bad news. The *good* news is Cal is heading back home to Dark Horse." Niles said that he plans to take the series straight to trade paperback rather than rerelease the issues already published by IDW in comics form. "***Supernatural Freak Machine*** will be released as a trade including issues 1, 2 & 3 plus 44 bonus, never-before-seen pages and the conclusion of the story. I might even get a new prose short in there, if there's space." And if that's not enough good news for fans of Niles' horror-noir series, the writer also confirmed that, "after the trade, Dark Horse and I will be announcing ***Criminal Macabre,*** a Cal McDonald *monthly series*!... Soon you'll have more Cal monster-kicking action than you know what to do with!" Look for more news on this in upcmoing issues of ***CSN.***

In: ***Freshmen #1,*** which is going back into print in September with the release of a second printing . This new edition will contain bonus material, including character design sketches, a preview of upcoming covers, and more! "*Seth [Green]* and I are thrilled that we're going back to print on ***Freshmen #1,*** because so many people have told us they weren't able to find it on the shelves," said co-creator and writer *Hugh Sterbakov.* The second issue should be available in comic shops by the time the second printing of ***Freshmen #1*** makes it to the racks.

She's Got the Power

...the sales power, that is! Power Girl continues to zoom off the comic shop racks, with her origin story propelling ***JSA Classified #2*** and ***JSA Classified #1 2nd Printing*** to sellout status within a day of release. To ensure that readers can keep up with this pivotal story, which has strong links to the upcoming ***Infinite Crisis,*** DC is sending both books.back to press.

The second printing of ***JSA Classified #2*** will feature an all-new black-and-white pen-

cil sketchcover by *Adam Hughes*, while the third printing of ***JSA Classified #1*** will feautre an altered version of *Amanda Conner &Jimmy Palmiotti's* cover for the first first printing.

"I'm just thrilled people are checking out Power Girl," writer *Geoff Johns* said. "She's one of the greatest heroines in the DCU alongside Wonder Woman, Oracle, Supergirl and Black Canary. The book has been a lot of fun and working with Amanda and Jimmy has been the highlight. Thanks to everyone reading the book!"

The latest printings of both books should be in comic shops at about the same time as this issue of *CSN*.

Quick Takes
by Cliff Biggers

Superman #219
Mark Verheiden (W); Ed Benes (A)

Action Comics #829
Gail Simone (W); John Byrne & Nelson (A)

Adventures of Superman #642
Greg Rucka (W); Karl Kerschl (A)

Wonder Woman #219
Greg Rucka (W); Rags Morales & Michael Bair (A)

Adventures of Superman #643
Greg Rucka (W); Karl Kerschl (A)
(DC $2.50@)

It's rare for a spinoff storyline manages to match the quality of the series that inspired it... and it's almost unheard of for a spinoff storyline to surpass the source series to such a degree that the original series seems secondary in comparison. But that's just what's happened with "Sacrifice," a four-part story arc that runs through the first four titles listed above, concluding in an epilogue issue in ***Adventures of Superman #643*** that's equally important to the story as a whole.

The interrelationship between Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman has been a linchpin of the DC Universe for decades now—but that relationship undergoes a radical change in these books. For many years, we've known Superman as the DC Universe's defender, Batman as the avenger, and Wonder Woman as the warrior; those roles are redefined here in such a way that other writers would be well advised to use this as a stepping stone to redefine their own versions of DC's most iconic heroes.

The story builds methodically—so much so that you might initially miss the significance of the events of ***Superman #219***, and you might dismiss the first segment of ***Action #829*** as repetition... but you'd be wrong. The seeming repetition is crucial to the storyline as readers and characters learn that things are not what they seem.

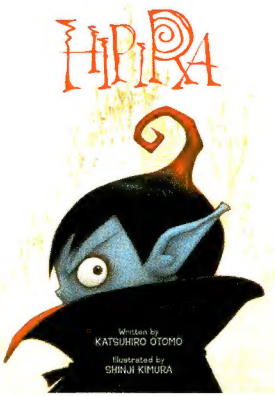
The ending of ***Wonder Woman #219*** remains just as shocking upon rereading as it did when I first came to the surprising final page. Certainly, the events are startling—but knowing the surprise that awaits on the final page makes it no less powerful.As you finish this book, you realize that you're witnessing DC history being remade.

Adventures of Superman #643 finds the characters struggling to come to terms with the events of "Sacrifice" in the same way that readers have to make an effort to get their heads around the significance of these changes. In a field where far too many things remain the same forever, this marks a change whose magnitude has yet to be wholly determined.

Grade - A+

Hipira
Katsuhiro Otomo (W); Shinji Kimura (A)
(Dark Horse $13.95)

The impish exploits of a vampire child may not sound like fodder for an all-ages book, but that's just what Otomo & Kimura deliver in this slender hardcover album. So does it work? Relatively well, in fact, thanks to their charmingly Charles-Addams-ish approach to the subject matter. Hipira doesn't exist in our world, where he might be frightening to younger readers; instead, his realm is a fantasy milieu occupied by elderly, revered vampires, unpredictable inventors, enchanted frogs, and much more.



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500+ pages of cool stuff that starts shipping in November!

CHECK OUT THESE OFFERINGS:

Reiko the Zombie Shop Vol. II Dark Horse presents Rei Mikamoto's spooky manga in which a town plagued by a serial killer is visited by a "necromancer for hire"... a girl who, for a price, will wake your dead. She's just she's not responsible for what follows!

Jonah Hex #11 The saga of Jonah Hex - the mysterious bounty hunter and thinking man's killer - returns to the DCU in an all-new series penned by Justin Gray & Jimmy Palmiotti, with amazing art by Luke Ross!

Down #1 Image Comics & Top Cow Studios serve up this all-new, fast-paced crime noir, following an undercover cop-gone-native in the city's drug trade, and the officer sent in to bring him out. Gritty action from the award-winning team of writer, Warren Ellis, and artist Tony Harris!

DeciMation! In the aftermath of the reality-warping events of *The House of M* epic, Marvel ushers in a host of new series with *DeciMation*, including **Generation M #1, New Excalibur #1**, and **X-Factor #1!**

AND BE SURE NOT TO MISS:

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While ***Hipira*** is a success in terms of tone and style, it's less successful insofar as storytelling is concerned. Stories end abruptly and unsatisfyingly—a problem that's more common in children's literature than it should be, since even children appreciate a story with a good ending.

Hipira introduces a fascinating world and a memorable main character; let's hope that Otomo and Kimura do something more substantial with both in the future.

Grade - B-

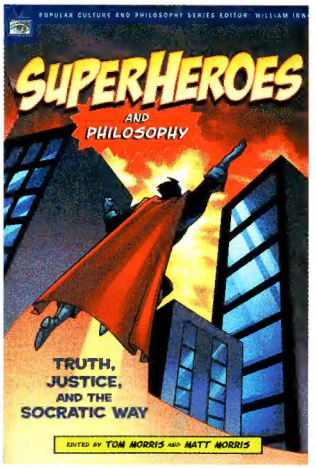
Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, & the Socratic Way

Tom Morris & Matt Morris, eds.
(Open Court, $17.95)

Many suprerheroes epitomize aspects of philosophy, so I was enthused to see a book that focused on those philosophical roots—and I wasn't disappointed. ***Superheroes and Philosophy*** delivers a number of thought-provoking essays, most of which eschew excessive jargon to make their points in a lucid, stimulating manner. To be sure, the prose is dense and sometimes complex—but that's because the essays in this book are packed with ideas that often defy simple presentation.

Not willing to let the editors set a reading order for me, I scanned the contents page and jumped from essay to essay, spurred by the promise of the titles. *James B. South's* piece on Barbara Gordon and moral perfectionism hooked me from the very beginning, mirroring some of my own thoughts on Barbara and her heroic quest. *Chris Ryall & Scott Tipton's* analysis of Fantastic Four as family is almost entirely Aristotelian, ignoring Freudian elements that might deserve at least some consideration, but it's still a good starting point. And *C. Stephen Layman's* "Why Be Moral?" is an essay that more superhero writers should read.

I was more surprised by the essays that disappointed me. *Dennis O'Neil's* look at the "Maniacal Morphing Meme" was less analytical than I expected from a writer of O'Neil's depth; *Mark Waid's* piece on "The Real Truth About Superman" revealed less to me about Waid's philosophical take on the ur-superhero than I wanted; *Aeon Skoble's* look at revisionism was more brief and less insightful than the subject ncessitates. None of these were bad reads, mind you—they simply left me thinking that the editors didn't follow *Theodore Sturgeon's* advice to "ask the next question," pushing these writers to explore their subjects more deeply.


POPULAR CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY SERIES EDITOR: WILLIAM IRWIN
SUPERHEROES
AND
PHILOSOPHY
TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND THE SOCRATIC WAY
EDITED BY TOM MORRIS AND MATT MORRIS

If you think the best superhero comics are the extended-fight issues, then this isn't a book for you. If, however, you ponder the question "why?" when you pay a visit to the DCU or the Marvelverse, then you'll enjoy the philosophical direction that this book offers.

Grade - B+

Thunderbird #1

Nathan Shumate (W); Bill Galvan (A)
(Atlantis Studios $2.95),

Thunderbird is exactly the sort of straight-ahead superhero adventure that *Bob Layton, David Michelinie, & Dick Giordano* aimed for with their short-lived Future Comics line; it's traditional adventure, capably done and pleasant enough. Unfortunately, it's also rather formulaic and undistinguished; the characters are a bit stereotyped and undeveloped (the loyal employee who admires his accomplished employer, the devoted assistant who must be protected,the rich tech-guru industrialist who's also a whiz in the lab, the amoral mercenaries) and the whole thing seems more *en medias rush* than *en medias res*. Not a bad book, just nothing outside of the ordinary; Galvan's art carries the story along quite nicely, though, and I suspect that with a little more experience, he'll find a place for himself as a mainstream superhero illustrator. It's no worse than a lot of superhero launches from some of the larger publishers—but the truth is, in today's market, a startup publisher has to produce material that's *better* than the larger publishers if he hopes to make a splash.

Grade - C+

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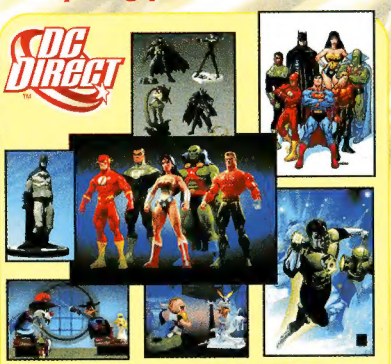

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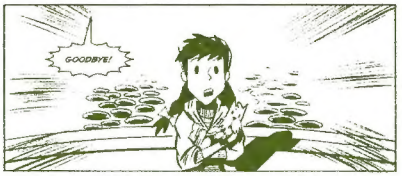


...IT'LL BE OKAY DOROTHY...
WE'LL THINK OF SOMEWAY TO GET YOU HOME...
For days, though, Dorothy would not be comforted.
AH!!!
Her friends thought and thought for a way to get her back to Kansas.

Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island

Tim Hamilton (W/A)

L. Frank Baum's The Wizard of Oz

Michael Cavallero (W/A)

Williams Shakespearea's Macbeth

Arthur Byron Cover (W); Tony Leonard Tamai (A)
(Puffin $9.99@)

What is it about Shakespeare that inspires creators to meddle and muck about?

The newest three volumes in the Puffin Graphics series of young-reader-focused literary classic adaptations include ***Macbeth, The Wizard of Oz,*** and ***Treasure Island.*** *Tim Hamilton's* adaptation of *Robert Louis Stevenson's* adventure is appropriately moody and action-oriented, with a confident ink-line that sometimes reminded me of *Al Williamson* or early *Jeffrey Jones* (although his layout is less inventively vital than the work of those creators). *Michael Cavellero's* ***The Wizard of Oz*** shows an animation influence, with boldly energetic lines and exaggerated energy that virtually leaps from the page.

And then there's ***Macbeth,*** adapted by *Arthur Byron Cover & Tony Leonard Tamai.*

THAT WHICH HATH MADE THEM DRUNK HATH MADE ME BOLD. WHAT HATH QUENCHED THEM HATH GIVEN ME FIRE.
KAPWH!
HARK! PEACE!
THE DOORS ARE OPEN.
I HAVE DRUGGED THEIR POSSETS THAT DEATH AND NATURE DO CONTEND ABOUT THEM WHETHER THEY LIVE OR DIE.

It's rare to find such a jarring disconnect between content and style; for some reason, Cover thought about it and apparently said to himself, "I know what Shakespeare forgot. Robots 'n' dragons and manga, that's what!" And then Cover proceeded to shoehorn all of these elements into Shakespeare's play, trivializing Shakespeare while doing nothing to clarify the storyline for young readers. Many panels do nothing to clarify the prose that will remain impenetrable to the younger readers for whom this book is purportedly intended. Ultimately, the prose and pictures seem so isolated from one another that readers might be left wondering if this is some cynical comic book version of ***What's Up, Tiger Lily?*** The only thing that stops it from failing entirely is that Tamai's artwork *is* quite good—just out of place.

Treasure Island*: Grade - B+*
The Wizard of Oz*: Grade - A-*
Macbeth: *Grade - D*

Fell #1

Warren Ellis (W); Ben Templesmith (A)
(Image $1.99)

Fell, Warren Ellis's new crime drama from Image Comics, is a comic that tries too hard. The title character is a former big-city cop who finds himself relocated to the blighted Snowtown, a dead-end beat in a dead-end town. Each sixteen-page issue tells a complete story, replacing the currently-trendy plot-starved decompressed storytelling for a tighter plot-driven tale. And I have no problems with the plot--but this is one of the few *Warren Ellis* comics in which the dialogue fails to click.

Ellis has packed ***Fell*** with the sort of tough-as-nails dialogue that writers like *Mickey Spillane* and *Raymond Chandler* popularized... but he all too frequently crosses the border into *Leslie Nielsen* spoof territory.

"Welcome to the Moon, Detective. Miles from anywhere. Colder than Eskimo nipples. And if you breathe, you die." (Most Eskimos I've seen in photos have actually been pretty well insulated by layers of clothing, so I'm not sure this comparison even works...)

"Moon St. Precinct House--where I work now. It smells like a leper's cesspit." (Does Hansen's disease actually cause a leper's waste matter to smell even worse than anyone else's?)

"I see you again and I'll shove this up your "ss so hard it'll hit you in the back of the teeth."

If these lines work for you, odds are you'll enjoy ***Fell.*** If they make you wince just in a bit, apprehensive that Ellis wants us to take this seriously, then you'll likely remain as disengaged from this story as I was.

Ben Templesmith's art is subdued, more minimally impressionistic than usual and filled with too many empty medium shots, giving the book a dreary look.

Ellis, Templesmith, crime drama... I had high hopes. But this one just doesn't deliver.
Grade - C+

Defenders #s 1 & 2

Keith Giffen & J.M. DeMatteis (W); Kevin Maguire (A)
(Marvel $2.99@)

One thing's for sure—the Defenders have never been funnier!

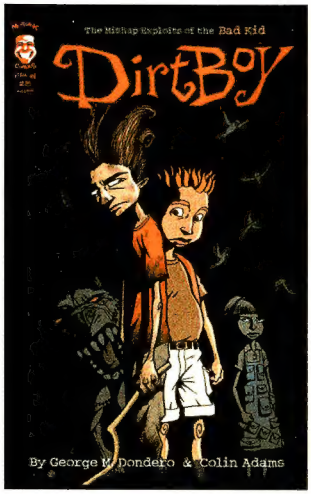
In this limited series, Giffen, DeMatteis, & Maguire bring their "bwah-hah-hah" ***Justice League*** style of storytelling to the Marvel Universe with a story that's more clever and irreverent than any ***Not Brand Ecch!*** spoof—but these are legitimate Marvel Universe stories, not throwaway satires!

Dialogue quirks, plot clichés, stereotypical characters—they're all fodder for fun in this series. If you don't laugh out loud at least once when reading these issues, you're a prime candidate to receive a sense of humor transplant...

My favorite story element? Everyone's continual harping on Dr. Strange's pompous manner of speaking; it's about time someone in the Marvel Universe noticed!

If there's any weak link to this series, it's the Silver Surfer; thus far, Giffen and DeMatteis don't really seem to know what they want to do with the character, so his scenes seem flat in comparison to the rest of the book.

If you have any appreciation for funny books, this is the funnybook series for you!
Grade - A



DirtBoy #1

George M. Dondero (W); Colin Adams (A)
(Moronik Comiks, $2.95)

Dirtboy is a very attractive book—and it would be a much better read if Dondero had been able to resist the urge to succumb to sophomoric burp-and-fart "humor" and continue with his surreal, slightly twisted story of dysfunctional youth in a warped fairy-tale forest. DirtBoy, a cross between Peter Pan, Bart Simpson, and Pigpen, becomes a reluctant hero when a young visitor to the forest is threatened for reasons unknown. By the end of the story, however, it becomes evident that DirtBoy isn't the only Bad Kid in this story.

Adams' art displays a bold, confident, distinctive ink-line, a great sense of layout and design, and an engaging style; Dondero's story is promising, although hampered by a penchant towards juvenile self-indulgence..

Grade - B-

The Physics of Superheroes

James Kakalios (w)
(Gotham Books $26.00)

Want the short version of this 352-page book? Superheroes are scientifically improbable, if not impossible.

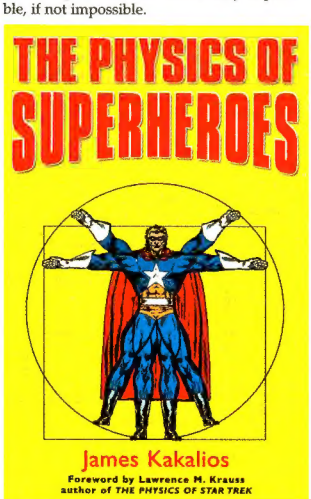
If you'd like a little more elucidation, though, then Kakalios' knowledgeable look at just why they won't work is cleverly informative reading.

It's obvious that Kakalios knows his comic books; he talks about superhero origins and events with the comfortable familiarity of a veteran reader, and that helps to convey an affection for the subject matter that makes the book much more engaging. Without this "I'm a fan too" tone, the book might come across as a dismissal of comics; instead, it's a well-crafted work that uses the all-too-often erroneous interpretations of physics as a stepping stone to educate and inform. And surprisingly enough, he reveals that some comics actually get it right; his analysis of the death of Gwen Stacy is a refreshing example of physics properly applied.

Kakalios' occasionally wanders into professorial jargon, resulting in the occasional paragraph taht I suspect most fans will totally skip—but these are realtively few, considering the subject matter of this book.

Give it a try and you might wonder why those high school and college physics courses weren't this entertaining.

Grade - B+



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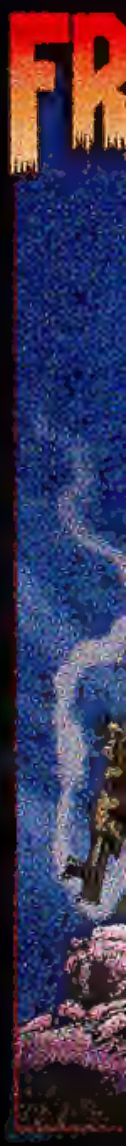

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